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International Theatre Collection

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I was tempted by *North Shields Theatres*; by *Father Ted: the Complete Scripts*; by the oft referenced but rarely encountered *The Actor's Analects*, the pedagogical anecdotes of *kabuki* performers; by Thomas Sheridan's *Lectures on the Art of Reading* of 1775. But I have chosen this, a relatively recent though rather rare book that I was surprised and delighted to find in the collection; sadly the even rarer Volume 2 is, as ever, absent.

Over the past eighteen months it has become a familiar, a recurrent point of reference, as I've completed work on a monograph entitled *All that remains...: an imperfect archaeology of the Mickery Theatre, Amsterdam* that will be published in the Netherlands next year. In this project, it is one of the essential 'fragments' – it is *Mickery Pictorial: a photographic history 1965-1987*, with an introduction by critic Janny Donker. It includes images of almost every production staged by Mickery during that twenty-two year period.

As background: Mickery was founded by film and television producer Ritsaert ten Cate who would become a key advocate and broker of alternative theatre practices worldwide, and subsequently founder of the graduate school Das Arts. Ritsaert, who died two years ago, was a member of the ten Cate textile manufacturing company and whilst he always denied possessing personal wealth, he had a real understanding of businesses, bureaucracies and funding bodies and how to deal with them. Mickery was his vision, his constantly changing concept. And this volume traces its development from the earliest days – presenting its own performances in a converted barn in Lonersloot, commencing in 1965 with Johny Speight's *If there weren't any blacks you'd have to invent them* – to its ultimately uneasy role as an agency producing works such as Peter Sellars's *Ajax*. Significantly, his interest was always in international – and principally Anglophone – theatre; Mickery always stood adjacent to the mainstream of Dutch theatre.

From the outset, he stages foreign companies; the first visitors to Lonersloot are Max Stafford-Clark's Traverse Theatre in 1966. He is catholic, though selective, in his

preferences, programming political companies such as 7:84 and Joint Stock along side Ken Campbell's Roadshow. But no Grotowski, Kantor only once, Odin once...He has an equal interest in audiences, in repeatedly challenging them but also in building an informed, critical community.

Herein lies the importance of the book: it is a unique record of the nascence and burgeoning of an alternative theatre scene. We see all the key moments in a particular history that many of us take to be our own. And I think we observe the post-dramatic come into being, or at least into focus. Mickery is surely one of those key – and differentiated – locales in which we observe it enacted; the sequence here gives some sense of origins, genealogy and continuities...

In 1967 Ellen Stewart and La Mama famously arrive with *Tom Paine*, quickly followed by Bread and Puppet. And then the flood of Brits – the People Show, the Freehold Company, Moving Being and the Pip Simmons Theatre Group that for a time later in the 1970s becomes virtually the Mickery house company... And this opportunity is important. Not only does a gig at Mickery pay well, supporting work elsewhere, but it provides kudos at home – companies begin to refer to themselves as 'international'. Here are familiar faces, some now well known in other contexts, some now departed, a snapshot of a neglected period in British theatre history.

But the barn can barely contain this onset, and its audience remains resolutely dinner-suited and well fed. So in 1972 Mickery moves to a gutted cinema on Rozengracht in the city itself. It is a black – or rather dirty brown – box and visiting companies are free to decide upon the staging configuration that best serves their work. In 1973 RAT Theatre appears, though I am absent from the photographs. And in 94a we catch a glimpse of the so-called 'Mickery modules', folding rostra, the first – I suspect – of their own kind, that helped rethink theatrical space in their use for staging and seating.

And then in 114a to 119b the first *Fairground* project, by the entirely fictitious Concept Theatre of Boston – ten Cate's invention – in which small blocks of audience were

moved around in boxes floating on compressed air, to witness short scenes revealed to them in different orders. This technology would reappear several times, notably in Tenjo Sakiki's interpretation of 'Instructions to Servants', *Cloud Cuckooland* (1978) – Tenjo Sajiki were regular visitors and ever-controversial. By 1984, the boxes are the size of shipping containers.

Here are semi-mythical performances: Pip Simmons's *An die Musick* (1975), Impact's *The Carrier Frequency* (1985); promenade productions such as Simmons's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1977); evidence of periods of fascination with instructional performance, with Stuart Sherman and The Theatre of Mistakes in 1980.

And also a sense of a gradually shifting aesthetic with the appearance of Mabou Mines, Theatre X from Milwaukee who later moonlight as the Mickery company, and then in 1978 – for the first time in Europe – the Performance Group with *Sakonett Point*, *Rumstick Road* and *Nayatt School*. In 1980 they return with *Point Judith*, on the point of becoming the Wooster Group. For a time, Mickery will be their European base; Spalding Gray stages *Three Monologues* in the small upstairs theatre formed from the cinema balcony.

The most immediate impact is upon ten Cate's own productions in which we see acting styles become mixed, media integrated and the potential of this old cinema rediscovered, most clearly in productions such as *Rembrandt and Hitler or Me* (1985). Here the reconfigured architecture – the uncovered balcony – involved different audiences over-seeing, half-seeing, seeing sequences through integrations and overlaps of media and action. Inkling of the digital perhaps enacted with analogue means, though difficult to appreciate in grainy black and white photographs.

And perhaps too upon an emergent Dutch/Flemish scene: in 1983 Jan Fabre presents work for the first time; in 1984 Mickery co-produces *The Power of Theatrical Madness*. In 1984 too, it's Epigonen, the company that will transform into Needcompany, Jan Lauwers becomes a favoured son; another shift apparent in *Need to Know* in 1987.

Or is all this something I already know? As a book, *Mickery Pictorial* doesn't easily reveal itself. It's about as interesting as someone else's family album – from mug-shots to snaps of holiday scenes. My reading and enthusiasm is perhaps tinged by perceptions gleaned elsewhere.

But I think – upon consideration – it does demonstrate evolutionary trends: from a theatre of strictly limited means in which actors face each other, through a turning to face the audience, and thence to an increasing technological and scenic sophistication.

This it does incidentally, without purpose. For at base, it is the document of one man's singular application and his achievement.